

# SERIOUS PET PROJECTS



Bryan Anderson and Rosie, a 14-month-old Rottweiler, do a high-five during training. Anderson hurt his back and neck in a car accident. With Rosie's help, he hopes to get rid of his cane. MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Staff Photographer

## Facing a wait, they train own service dogs.



Anderson works with Rosie on picking up a pill bottle. Rosie was a gift to Anderson from his wife, Norma, after he had to stop working. The dog's next goal: Retrieving a ringing cellphone.

By **Michaëlle Bond**  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**A**fter she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis last spring, Laura Shepler lost her balance and ended up on the floor at least once a week. Once she tripped over her cane and crashed to the floor, cracking her fingers and tearing muscles in her shoulder. Now, she has a furry means of support always by her side. Her service dog, Pumpkin, used to be a family pet. Now, the 3-year-old golden retriever helps make Shepler's life easier by picking up items and using her body and the harness she wears to keep Shepler steady.

Shepler even hopes to find another job as a school administrator — with Pumpkin.

"She can do so much more for me than a cane does," Shepler said.

Each week, Shepler, 43, drives more than an hour from Wernersville, Berks County, where she lives with Pumpkin, her husband, and her 4-year-old daughter, to her service dog training class in Frazer.

See **DOGS** on B8

## Dogs

Continued from B1

About 12 million adults in the United States need assistance with everyday tasks such as walking, carrying a bag of groceries, or opening a door, according to a 2012 report by the Census Bureau.

And the percentage of people needing help is increasing. For people with disabilities, having a service dog can mean independence.

But the wait for a trained service dog can be long, said Toni Eames, president of the International Association of Assistance Dog Partners, which provides resources for people with guide, hearing, and service dogs. "Sometimes you can wait up to three to five years to get a dog from a program," she said.

Many people, such as Shepler, can't afford to wait. So they train their own service dogs, and can reap the benefits while doing it.

### Teach the basics

In training classes such as those offered by the nonprofits Main Line Deputy Dog in Frazer and United Disabilities Services in Lancaster, owners can teach their dogs the basics, such as how to ignore distractions or lie calmly under a table during dinner at a restaurant.

The dogs learn how to turn lights on and off by pressing a button on the floor with their paws. They can learn to remind their owners to take their medication, or to interrupt destructive behaviors, such as self-harm.

They learn tasks for specific needs associated with multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy, and other illnesses. They can aid the elderly, and veterans with post-traumatic stress can train service dogs to wake them from nightmares and to create space in a crowd when they feel overwhelmed.

The dogs can learn tasks as simple as closing doors for people who have difficulty doing it themselves.

Luke Smith, 27, of Norristown was in a car accident in 2012 that left him paralyzed from the chest down. His pet 8-month-old American pit bull terrier puppy, Shaka, recently learned to shut doors. Smith has been going to classes to train Shaka for the last few months.

"The more I do it, the more I see how much he can do for me," Smith said. "Him picking up stuff for me is the biggest help in the world."

Trainers generally do not choose pit bulls to be service dogs, but Smith and Shaka are excelling at the training. "We're going to show everybody," Smith said.

When Mark Stieber, executive director of Main Line Deputy Dog, retired from his marketing job a few years ago, he wanted to use his lifelong love of dogs to

help people, he said.

As he developed the class, he visited Top Dog, a nonprofit in Arizona that has been helping people train their own service dogs for more than 25 years.

### 'A long way'

Stieber said he was hopeful that a few of the dogs in the class would be ready in the summer to go out into the world without the "in training" label on their vests.

The 14 dogs in the class are taught by Mary Remer, an internationally renowned trainer, at her What a Good Dog training facility, with help from volunteers. "They've all come a long way," Stieber said.

Getting through a service dog training program isn't easy, and not everyone is willing to invest the time to do it, said Lori Breece, who manages training programs for United Disabilities Services. Over the last six years, a dozen dogs have been in the two-year class for owners training their own dogs, but only two have made it through.

For Bryan Anderson of Trevoze, Bucks County, training his 14-month-old Rottweiler, Rosie, gives him a reason to get up in the morning. Anderson hurt his back and neck in a car accident a few years ago, and the general contractor had to stop working. He became depressed. The dog was a gift from his wife, Norma, who thought the pet could help.

Anderson's fingers are numb, so he drops things all the time, including his cane, he said. Rosie picks that up, along with dropped pill bottles, paper, and Anderson's cellphone. The next step is having her retrieve the phone when it rings.

And when Rosie's harness arrives, Anderson hopes to get rid of the hated cane that his wife and doctor make him use. The 47-year-old said the cane makes him feel "like an old person."

### Fewer stares

And when you have a service dog instead of a cane, Anderson said, people stare less. "They don't know something's wrong with you," he said.

Laura Shepler has mostly stopped using the cane that tripped her. Since starting training in late June, Pumpkin has learned how to brace herself to help Shepler walk.

While Shepler was on a train recently on her way to a doctor's appointment, she went to get food from the cafe car, with Pumpkin steadying her as the train rocked back and forth. "I never would have made it safely without her," said Shepler, who would have had to ignore her hunger and thirst during the six-hour trip. "I wouldn't have had the courage to even try."

✉ mbond@philly.com  
☎ 610-313-8207 📱 @MichaëlleBond